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The Significance of Shipbuilding Technology at Narasapur Peta (C.1500-1800)

– K. V. Ramakrishna Rao

Indian Shipbuilding without Archaeological Evidences

About Indian shipbuilding activities, sarcastic, caustic and cynical remarks have always been made in one way or the other. During the medieval period, though, the Indian, the Arab and the Chinese maritime traders were competing with each other and with the sudden and mysterious disappearance of the Cholas; the other two groups dominated the South –East Asian oceanic areas. With the advent of the European Companies, the Indian, Arab and Chinese maritime traders, sailors and ship builders were either absorbed in to the European Companies or continued to play their role as intermediaries, agents and negotiators.¹ Narsapur Peta is an estuary located between Masulipatnam/Machilipatnam, Armagaon/Arumuganeri, Kakinada, Samalkota, Yanam, Kalingapatnam etc. All these were ancient and medieval ports where Indian internal and external trades were going on. The Muslims and later European Companies had just selected these ports to exploit the available resources. First Madaopallam and then Narsapur lost their advantage when the river Godavari changed its course to the end of the 17th century.²

Narasapur and Madapollam are two nearby towns situated on the basin of the river Godavari. A critical study of the records of European Companies bring out not only shipbuilding, repair and reconditioning processes carried out there, but also other manufacturing activities. William Foster gave interesting details.³ Golkonda king gave Permission to East India Company, for building factory and ship-repair.⁴ As usual, the European Companies got permission from the ruler for carrying out business and setting up their factories. The British got

permission to the engagement as surgeon John Westrow to attend to a Persian merchant, i.e. through doctors and surgeons, the British used to get details what they want about. That is once the rivalry of other European Companies was removed, the production of goods could be consolidated in one factory instead of scattering at different places. The factory at Madapollam or Madhavaipalm was important one where cotton cloths were manufactured. Coarse woven cotton and long cloth from Narsapur was sent to Masulipatnam converting to Chintz. In fact, they learned the art of printing on cloth by collecting different samples of salts, dyes, yarn, etc.⁵ The final products were carried from Madapollam.

The “Winter Frigate” was refitted at Narsapur⁶ i.e. the British ship was reconditioned there. Narsapur had a shipbuilding yard and “*the timber for shipbuilding is brought down from higher up the river*”. Here, Golconda ships were built and European ships repaired. The British and the Dutch exploited the iron deposits of this area and streynsham Master records mention that in A.D. 1679 their factory at Narsapur had⁷, *there being ‘as many forges as 300 smiths may invoke(d) in them’*. The Dutch had an iron foundry at Narsapur⁸, near the mouth of the Vashista branch of the Godavari, as early as 1665. The iron factories established by the European companies or rather taken over by them were interconnected. Evidently steel was also produced, as it is specifically mentioned in the list of other goods.⁹ There was ship/boat movement from Narsapur to Balasur/Ballasore with goods.¹⁰ The French factory was there at yanam nearby.¹¹ Thus, the rivalry of the European Companies can also be noted. For business interests, they might have worked separately, but in

exploiting the Indian goods and services, perhaps they worked together.

The European under-Estimation of Indian Shipbuilding Activities

The shipbuilding at Narasapur Peta was the attraction of the European navigators and mariners till modern times.¹² The seventeenth century Europeans witnessed shipbuilding activities going on in Narasapur Peta near Masulipatnam, in the eastern Deccan, and concluded that *because timber, iron and other necessary materials were abundant there*. Moreland¹³ noted that Hindus, Muslims and Portuguese (not Christians?)¹⁴ had their ships built at the yards and they were often as large as 600 tons. As timber was available, the shipbuilding industry was there in the Kalyan-Bhivandi area of the western Deccan, as Shivaji encouraged the industry to a great extent to build up a Naval and Mercantile fleet. Thus, they agree then¹⁵ *"At any rate this tradition of shipbuilding and naval activities was carried into the eighteenth century, though hardly anything is known about the organizational aspects of the industry!"* Many times, the usage of iron of India is denied by the researched.¹⁶ In the shipbuilding, it is presumed that Indian ships were always sewn ones without any iron nails etc for joining.¹⁷ As in original shipbuilding, the joints were always natural i.e. wood to wood joint was carpentry and the seepage blocked with resin made of organic colloids. Thus, the requirement of nails was not necessitated. However, for repair and reconditioning, the nails could have been used for immediate readiness of the ships for sailing.

Narasapur peta shipbuilding derived from the earlier periods: if nothing comes from vacuum, so also the Narasapur Peta shipbuilding technology capable of building 600 MT ships with indigenous technology. As one western writers¹⁸ noted, during the Muslim rule, Narasapur continued to have excellent dockyards where sheathing and chalking ships were built for the Golconda merchant fleets¹⁹, for native merchants and the companies and European free merchants. In other words, it acted as a common shipbuilding yard. As the town came under rule of different foreigners, the mode of working or even technology of the people might have been changed, but the science behind could have been there. As the river itself changed its course, the vocation of the people also changed, but that does not mean the activities carried on were myth.

Its original name was "Narasapuram" also known as "Nrusimhapuri" and "Abhinava Bhootapuri", as one Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple constructed between 15th and 16th centuries. In some European documents, it is mentioned as "Narsapur peta"²⁰. Besides Vishnu temple, there is a Siva temple, which is older than this temple, where the Linga was reportedly consecrated by Rama. Tracing back to the Chalukya period, the added constructions point to 9th century and thereafter. The Bramarambha Mallikarjuna Swamy Temple, Narsapur has been reconstructed one, as could be seen from the pillars, sculptures found on the way and near to the temple. The Continuity and Continued Shipbuilding Technology just because "the availability of timber, iron and other necessary materials were abundant" at any place. The shipbuilding activities could not have been developed all of a sudden without any knowledge of such techniques. This is implied the existence of such science and technology among the Indians, which is correlated and corroborated by the rulers of the area. The Krishna-Godavari region has continuous history ruled by Ikshvakus, Salankayanas Pallavas and others. Incidentally, Kings of these dynasties issued ship-type coins. Incidentally, in 10th-11 centuries, the presence of the Cholas was found here, who were known for their maritime activities. During the reign of Rajaraja I (A.D.985-1016), when two rebel princes of the Eastern Chalukya family sought refuge in his court, he utilized the claim of one of these princes, Saktivarma. Making him the representative of the Chola Empire, he subdued the Eastern Chalukyas. However, as Chalukyas of Kalyani were supporting the other prince, there were skirmishes between them and the Cholas. An Eastern Chalukya Prince, Rajendra, occupied the Chola throne in A.D. 1070 under the name of Kulottunga I, however, Vijayaditya VII, a cousin of Rajaraja, continued to rule over Vengi till his death in A.D. 1076 when the Eastern Chalukya dynasty came to an end. Though, the dynasties appear and disappear, the Kings ruled had control over the trade, shipbuilding etc., till the advent of the European powers.

Conclusion

The Godavari basin has been an important coastal areas dotted with many shipping and trading centres – Bimillipatnam, Vishakhapatnam, Kakinada, Narasapur, Masulipatnam, Divy, Nizampatnam, Krishnapuram, Aramagaon etc. How the change in course of river could change the history is proven in

the rise and fall of the shipbuilding glory of Narasapur. In fact, Narsapar was famous not only for ship repairing or rebuilding, but also for textiles and iron and steel products. The shipbuilding and repairing activities were going on in Narasapur for more than two centuries till the course of change of river Godavari. As it went inside or the river waters dwindled away, its importance reduced and the shipbuilding activities shifted to Masulipatnam and Vishakhapatnam later.

References

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16. Horse raiding is denied, though hourse-stirrup was invented and used only in India. In fact, the domestication of hourse has been made controversial Indian historiography.
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